

NCA  
VOC FOR PGM/FN  
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6174  
PAUL FRANCUCH

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## LABOR'S NEMESIS -- AUTOMATION

ANNCR:

AUTOMATION IS ONE OF THE ISSUES IN THE STRIKE WHICH RECENTLY CRIPPLED AMERICA'S RAILWAY SYSTEM. THE ISSUE OF WORKERS BEING REPLACED BY COMPUTER-CONTROLLED MACHINES IS NOT NEW FOR ORGANIZED LABOR IN THIS COUNTRY, BUT IT HAS TAKEN ON NEW DIMENSIONS IN RECENT YEARS. PAUL FRANCUCH EXPLAINS IN THIS BACKGROUND REPORT: VOICE:

THE BATTLE BETWEEN MEN AND MACHINES HAS BEEN GOING ON EVER SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION. BUT HERE IN THE UNITED STATES, AND IN MANY OTHER INDUSTRIALIZED COUNTRIES, THAT BATTLE HAS GAINED NEW INTENSITY SINCE THE RECENT INVENTION OF WHAT ARE CALLED ELECTRONIC MICROCOMPUTERS. THESE SMALL, SOPHISTICATED ELECTRONIC "BRAINS" CAN BE PROGRAMMED TO DO SUCH THINGS AS RUN MACHINES ON AN ASSEMBLY LINE, PRINT NEWSPAPERS, AND EVEN FLY JET AIRLINERS. NOT ONLY CAN THEY DO IT, THEY ARE DOING IT, AND THE USE OF MICROCOMPUTERS IS BECOMING MORE WIDESPREAD EVERY DAY. SOME BELIEVE THAT THE THREAT MICROCOMPUTERS POSE TO LABOR UNIONS -- ESPECIALLY IN THE MANUFACTURING SECTOR -- IS ENORMOUS.

ABOUT TWENTY MILLION AMERICAN WORKERS BELONG TO LABOR UNIONS -- A FIGURE WHICH HAS HELD STEADY OVER THE PAST DECADE. MEMBERSHIP GROWTH HAS OCCURRED MAINLY AMONG UNIONS WHICH REPRESENT STATE AND MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT WORKERS. ALTHOUGH INDUSTRIAL WORKERS ARE STILL HEAVILY REPRESENTED BY ORGANIZED LABOR, THE NUMBER OF JOBS IN THIS SECTOR OF THE ECONOMY IS DROPPING.

AUTOMATION IS REPLACING WORKERS, DESPITE UNION EFFORTS TO STOP IT. MOREOVER, UNION RESISTANCE TO AUTOMATION IS ONE OF THE REASONS WHY MANY INDUSTRIES HAVE MOVED FROM THE NORTHEASTERN UNITED STATES AND THE GREAT LAKES REGION TO THE SOUTH, WHERE ORGANIZED LABOR IS LESS WELCOME.

BUT THERE ARE SIGNS THAT ORGANIZED LABOR MAY BE LOSING THE FIGHT AGAINST AUTOMATION THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. THE PRINTING OF NEWSPAPERS, FOR EXAMPLE, USED TO DEPEND HEAVILY ON MANUAL LABOR. BUT ACROSS THE NATION, DAILY PAPERS ARE INCREASINGLY TURNING TO COMPUTERIZED TYPE-SETTING AND PRINTING. WITH INFLATED OPERATING COSTS AND KEEN COMPETITION FROM RADIO AND TELEVISION, NEWSPAPERS HAVE CONVINCED UNION LOCALS THAT COST-CUTTING AUTOMATED MACHINES ARE NEEDED IN ORDER FOR THEM TO SURVIVE.

THE NEWSPAPERS HAVE PAID A PRICE FOR THE UNION'S ACQUIESCENCE. WORKERS REPLACED BY MACHINES ARE GUARANTEED A PERMANENT JOB. BUT THE UNIONS MAY BE PAYING A GREATER PRICE, BECAUSE ONCE ALL OF THEIR MEMBERS EITHER RETIRE OR RESIGN, THE UNION WILL CEASE TO EXIST. SOME OBSERVERS VIEW THIS DEAL AS A LONG-TERM SUICIDE PACT FOR THE UNIONS.

LABOR WATCHERS ARE KEEPING A CLOSE EYE ON DEVELOPMENTS IN THE PRESENT NEW YORK CITY NEWSPAPER STRIKE. THE PAPERS THERE HAVE ALREADY STARTED TO AUTOMATE THEIR OPERATIONS. SOME OBSERVERS BELIEVE THAT IF THE TOUGH NEW YORK UNIONS GIVE IN TO THE AUTOMATION DEMANDS OF MANAGEMENT IT WILL REPRESENT A CLEAR SIGNAL TO INDUSTRIES NATIONWIDE THAT THE AGE OF AUTOMATION IS ONE STEP CLOSER TO MATURITY.

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